St. John of the Cross and the Dark Night of the Soul

Finding God's Light in a World That Has Forgotten Him

By Father Hank Kraychir, Th.D.
Celtic Catholic Church
Director, St. Columba's School of Theology and Seminary

> *"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge."*
> **Hosea 4:6 (NABRE)**

There are few saints whose writings have penetrated the mysteries of the spiritual life as profoundly as those of **St. John of the Cross**, the sixteenth century Carmelite priest, mystic, reformer, and Doctor of the Church. More than four centuries after his death, his writings continue to inspire clergy, religious, and lay faithful because they speak not only to the intellect but also to the deepest longings of the human soul.

Among his greatest contributions to Catholic spirituality is his teaching on **the Dark Night of the Soul**. Unfortunately, this expression has become one of the most misunderstood phrases in Christianity. Many people use it to describe depression, discouragement, emotional exhaustion, or any difficult period of life. While these experiences are real and deserve compassion, they are not what St. John of the Cross was describing.

For St. John, the Dark Night of the Soul is a work of divine grace. It is the loving action of God, who purifies the soul by removing every attachment that prevents complete union with Him. During this mysterious work, God teaches His children to love Him, not because of emotional consolation or earthly blessings, but simply because He is God and worthy of all love.

This teaching may be more important today than at any other time in history.

We live in an age overflowing with information yet starving for wisdom. We have learned how to communicate instantly around the world, yet many have forgotten how to communicate with God. We have become experts at satisfying temporary desires while neglecting the eternal needs of the soul.

The prophet Hosea lamented this very condition when he proclaimed:

> *"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge."*
> **Hosea 4:6 (NABRE)**

His words continue to echo throughout our own generation.

Our culture often teaches that happiness is found in wealth, pleasure, popularity, power, or personal freedom without moral responsibility. These messages are repeated so often that many accept them

without question. As a result, countless lives become trapped in addiction, greed, lust, violence, anger, loneliness, and despair. Entire generations have been formed by philosophies that promise freedom while producing only deeper slavery.

Many people who struggle with addiction or destructive lifestyles did not begin by consciously choosing evil. Rather, they were shaped by broken homes, abuse, unhealthy friendships, poor examples, or a society that normalized sinful behavior. Some were taught that strength comes through violence. Others believed happiness could be found in drugs, alcohol, money, sexual immorality, or worldly success. These influences slowly shaped their understanding of truth, love, and human dignity.

Then, through the grace of God, often encountered through the proclamation of the Gospel, the Sacraments, the witness of faithful Christians, or a profound moment of conversion, they encounter the living Jesus Christ.

For perhaps the first time in their lives, they experience forgiveness instead of condemnation, hope instead of despair, peace instead of chaos, and unconditional love instead of rejection. Sacred Scripture comes alive. Prayer becomes meaningful. The Holy Eucharist becomes more than a ritual. It becomes an encounter with the living Christ.

Many converts describe this season as one of the happiest periods of their lives.

Yet something unexpected often follows.

The excitement begins to fade.

Prayer feels dry.

God appears silent.

The emotions that once accompanied their conversion seem to disappear.

Many conclude that God has abandoned them.

St. John of the Cross offers a very different explanation.

Perhaps God has not withdrawn.

Perhaps He has begun a deeper work.

Like a loving parent who eventually removes the training wheels from a child's bicycle, or a wise teacher who gradually expects the student to think independently, God invites His children to mature in faith. He teaches them to seek His presence rather than His gifts, His will rather than their own comfort, and His glory rather than emotional satisfaction.

For those recovering from addiction, this teaching is especially meaningful.

Recovery is much more than avoiding drugs or alcohol. It involves renewing the mind, healing painful memories, restoring relationships, and learning an entirely new way of living.

The person who once depended upon drugs must learn to experience peace through the grace of God.

The person consumed by anger must learn forgiveness.

The person ruled by greed must learn generosity.

The person who lived only for pleasure must discover the joy of holiness.

The person taught by society to reject God must learn that true freedom is found only in Christ.

This transformation cannot be accomplished by human effort alone.

It is the work of divine grace.

Although addiction itself is not the Dark Night of the Soul, both involve surrendering false attachments so that something infinitely greater may take their place. One is a process of recovery from destructive habits. The other is a process of spiritual purification. Yet both remind us that lasting freedom requires letting go of whatever keeps us from God.

God does not merely forgive sinners.

He transforms them.

As Saint Paul writes:

> *"Therefore, whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come."*
> **2 Corinthians 5:17 (NABRE)**

St. John beautifully illustrates this transformation by comparing the soul to a log placed within a blazing fire.

At first the wood smokes.

It crackles.

Its impurities are burned away.

Gradually it becomes so filled with fire that it begins to glow with the very fire that transformed it.

So it is with every Christian.

God slowly burns away pride, selfishness, fear, sinful desires, and every attachment that keeps us from perfect charity.

The process may be painful.

It is never pointless.

It is always motivated by divine love.

Pastors, spiritual directors, and Christian counselors must also remember an important distinction. The Dark Night of the Soul is not the same as depression, trauma, addiction, or mental illness. These conditions deserve compassionate pastoral care, appropriate medical treatment when necessary, faithful counseling, and the healing ministry of the Church.

Sometimes psychological suffering and spiritual purification may exist together.

They should never be confused with one another.

Wisdom lies in discerning the difference while ministering with both truth and charity.

The Church has always taught that God works through grace as well as through the ordinary means He has provided. Prayer, the Sacraments, spiritual direction, Christian fellowship, and appropriate medical care all have their proper place in restoring the whole person.

Ultimately, the message of St. John of the Cross is one of extraordinary hope.

God never abandons those who seek Him.

He never wastes suffering.

Even when He seems silent, He is speaking.

Even in darkness, He is guiding.

Even in weakness, He is strengthening.

Even during the longest night, He is preparing the dawn.

The recovering addict who remains faithful one day at a time.

The prisoner who discovers forgiveness.

The family restored after years of brokenness.

The person raised in violence who learns peace.

The sinner who becomes a saint.

Each bears witness to the transforming power of God's grace.

Saint Paul reminds us:

> *"We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."*
> **Romans 8:28 (NABRE)**

The Dark Night of the Soul is not the end of the Christian journey.

It is often the doorway through which God transforms ordinary believers into faithful disciples, faithful disciples into mature servants, and mature servants into saints whose lives radiate the love of Jesus Christ.

St. John of the Cross teaches us that the goal of the Christian life is not merely to know about God, but to know Him so intimately that every thought, every word, and every action reflects His divine love.

When we understand this truth, we no longer fear the darkness. We recognize that even when we cannot see God's hand, we can trust His heart. The God who leads us through the night is the same God who promises the joy of a new dawn.

May each of us have the courage to trust God, even when we cannot feel His presence, knowing that the God who walks with us through the darkness is preparing us for the everlasting light of His heavenly kingdom.

> *"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear?"*
> **Psalm 27:1 (NABRE)**

"In the evening of life, we will be judged on love."
— St. John of the Cross

Unless otherwise noted, all Sacred Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE), the English language translation approved for liturgical use by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.